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Experience and Philosophy in Urban Public Schools

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Honors Research Project

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From January until May, I served as a student teacher at Canton McKinley High School, in Canton, Ohio. The school is an urban public high school in Northeast Ohio. During this time, I taught four history classes at the tenth grade level, learning a substantial amount regarding planning, instruction, assessment, classroom management, and discipline. This paper will use this experience at Canton McKinley High School in combination with educational research and theory in order to present an educational philosophy specifically regarding discipline, classroom management, testing, curriculum, motivation, and achievement, in urban public schools.

Canton McKinley High School possesses over 2,400 students from grades 9-12. The majority, 57%, of students at McKinley High School are minorities, most being African-Americans, and the school also has a substantial economically disadvantaged population (The Canton City School District 2018-2019 Calendar & Annual Report). The four classes which I have taught are Modern American History courses, two of these four being "advanced" courses. The classroom itself has an array of utilities at its disposal. There is a Smartboard along with a projector which allows for visual and interactive activities; iPads are issued to every student to ensure internet access. Through their iPads, students complete assignments, locate research, and participate in content review. There are also two chalkboards so that objectives, standards, and important vocabulary can be written and posted on the board for the duration of the unit.

Aside from the day-to-day, common assessments, students are expected to take the Ohio AIR Test. The district and high school align their instruction to both AIR standards and Ohio standards. Many teachers use personalized pacing guides in order to follow closely to standards. In the Social Studies Department in the high school, most teachers utilize independent practice, partner practice, kinesthetic instruction and learning, and student-centered instruction.

Arriving at McKinley High School, I immediately began to work on creating a positive learning environment. One of the most important aspects of education facilitation is creating a positive learning environment amongst the students. In inner city schools, it is especially important for the educator to demonstrate mutual respect for, rapport with, and responsiveness to students with varied needs and backgrounds. Additionally, the educator must challenge the students to engage in learning. Throughout my time at McKinley, I attempted to perform in these ways.[1] By continuously engaging in eye contact with most of the students in the class, I developed basic, personal connections with the students. The questions which I asked the students during lessons required the students to both critically think and recall prior knowledge in order to answer. At several points during the lessons, I paused from the content and engaged in conversation with students regarding aptitude tests and future college options. One student in particular often had multiple questions regarding colleges in the area, so we briefly paused from the lesson and conversed about his choices and options. This conversation furthered rapport with the student. Building rapport with the students is one of the most important aspects of teaching. Teachers who build this rapport unlock an array of possibilities and opportunities in their instruction. Student rapport fosters elements such as trust, respect, and work-ethic. Without these

[1] Information regarding my experience during my time at Canton McKinley also includes reflections from my 2019 EdTPA

connections, teaching experience and success is highly hindered. However, it is especially vital that students develop a sense of trust and rapport with teachers at an early age, even before they reach secondary school (Hamre and Pianta, 2001). Students' successes in forming positive relationships with their teachers promotes future academic, behavior, and social successes; negative and conflicted teacher-student relationships serve as a significant indicator of a variety of negative academic and behavioral outcomes (Ibid). Personally, I believe that rapport is absolutely vital in all schools and for all ages, but is especially vital with students in urban and inner-city environments. Without rapport, a classroom simply cannot function at its maximum capability. This rapport, I have learned, goes hand-in-hand with one important aspect of classroom management: discipline.

Discipline proved to be one of the most interesting aspects at McKinley. The school implements a discipline plan referred to simply as "the Framework." The Framework is not PBIS (Positive Behavior Intervention) or RP (Restorative Practices). Instead, this plan is an independent product of a proactive system of progressive responses geared towards ensuring consistent actions throughout the district as well as building positive relationships with all students. This plan hinges upon the support of school teachers, counselors, behavioral health providers, community workers, psychologists, student success coaches, safety and security staff, CARE team members, Dean of Students, and "You're Expected to Success" (YES)/ P4P teachers. The plan offers a four-tiered consequence system by which certain-level behaviors are responded to with appropriate consequences (Canton City Schools Discipline Framework). However, both in my time student teaching and speaking with other teachers at the building, it is evident that this system of discipline has not been successful. I spoke with one district teacher

who believes that the disciplinary plan has not been successful. In a brief interview, the teacher said, it is not successful simply because "it is not enforced."

The district is currently receiving a failing report card grade from the state of Ohio (Ohio Department of Education). In the eyes of upper administration as well as other school and community members, an important focus in improving the report card grade is to drastically decrease out-of-school suspension rates. This idea is not new. Many researchers and educational theorists have argued that out-of-school suspension rates correlate with incarceration rates. This correlation is often referred to by many as the 'school-to-prison pipeline.' Marilyn Elias argues that the correlation develops from "policies that encourage police presence at schools…harsh tactics, and automatic punishments that result in suspensions and out-of-class time…combined with zero-tolerance policies…" (Elias, 2013). Elias goes on to state that racial minorities and children with disabilities are overrepresented in the "pipeline," as "black children constitute 18 percent of students, but they account for 46 percent of those suspended more than once," making black children "3.5 times more likely to be suspended than their white classmates" (Ibid). So, rooted in this argument, the administration of Canton City Schools aims to focus on reducing suspension rates. But how can they do this? Although no administrators or faculty would openly advocate for it, they are left with only one practical, achievable option: do not implement the Framework behavior plan.

Canton McKinley High School has had success in reducing their out-of-school suspensions. Its in-school and (YES) classrooms offer alternative options for students in danger of out-of-school suspension. In these classrooms, students who have been disciplined are able to complete their work while remaining in school. However, this reduction or at least relaxation of higher tiered consequences completely contradicts the original goals of the Framework.

According to level 4 of the four-tiered Framework, suspension is recommended for behaviors which "seriously affect the learning environment or the safety of the student and/or others in the school or is a legal violation." But how can this Framework be implemented if one of the goals of the district is to dramatically reduce out-of-school suspension rates? It simply cannot be implemented. The Framework disciplinary plan and the goals of the district contradict each other.

Teaching in Canton McKinley High School, I have witnessed first-hand the contradiction between district goals and discipline. For example, students who vehemently defy educators or other members of the staff, even some students who become involved in violent confrontations with other students are often simply referred to the in-school or YES classrooms, where they may complete their work, but only if they chose. Then, after a short period of time, those same students are back in their normal classrooms, having suffered little consequences.

It is difficult to blame the school and its administrators, though, as they are under constant pressure to increase their report card score. One question I began to wonder about was, 'Should highly impoverished schools be held to the same standards as affluent schools?' Canton City Schools is one of the most impoverished districts in the state of Ohio. An overwhelming majority of its residents are renters. Therefore, district funding receives only 3 percent of its revenue from property taxes, and it almost completely relies upon state-provided grants. Absenteeism is common. Single parent homes are pervasive, and mobility rates are high, as students and their families are constantly coming into and leaving the district. Unemployment is high, and 100 percent of students receive free breakfasts and lunches (The Canton City School District 2018-2019 Calendar & Annual Report). Knowing these economic elements of the district, it is unlikely that schools similar to Canton City Schools can compete with more affluent

schools with higher amounts of resources at their disposal. Yet, both types of schools are evaluated by the same state standards.

Canton City Schools did receive state funding to provide iPads for each student at McKinley High School. In a global society which is increasingly becoming reliant on technology, it is important to integrate technological literacy in schools. However, the introduction of iPads in the high school has opened a can of worms concerning discipline. Using both their smartphones and iPads, students often become so engrossed in their technology that they do not complete assignments or pay attention in class. This may seem like the fault of the teachers for being unable to enforce policy on technology; however, there is absolutely no school policy concerning technology and student discipline.

Regardless, from my experience and research at McKinley High School, I believe that urban and inner-city schools must not only have a consistent and firm disciplinary plan, but also one that is compatible with their overall disciplinary goals. It is also important that administration and teachers remain in constant collaboration and communication in implementing disciplinary policy.

Engaging students in learning is also one of the most difficult challenges for teachers in any environment. Teachers must focus on developing students' analytical skills in relation to sources or accounts of historical events or a social studies phenomenon building and supporting arguments or conclusions. During a unit covering the Great Depression, I asked students to recall prior knowledge regarding the events leading up to the Great Depression. This recall refreshed their minds about previous lessons and units, particularly the unit concerning how American purchasing power and consumerism grew unchecked during the 1920s. We then made a connection to how that growth unintentionally caused the Great Depression. Through open

discussion and reflection, we, as a class, analyzed how the Stock Market crashed and rampant speculation increased, and banks, farms, and business went bankrupt. Students were then asked to reflect on how the Stock Market crash of 1929 and rampant speculation contributed to the failure of banks, businesses, and farms, and in result of those failures, high unemployment.

Once teachers establish a positive learning environment and understand how to encourage classroom engagement, teachers must tailor their instruction to link students' prior academic learning and personal, cultural, and community assets with new learning. I did this through a number of ways throughout my experience at McKinley. During the budget activity, students were given the opportunity to envision themselves living in Canton, OH, in 1931. Through the reading and discussion, students learned that twenty-five percent of people living in Canton (the city where these students currently live and attend school) fell to unemployment in 1931. The students were then instructed to create a budget for the month, given a list of supplies, prices, and requirements; many of the students found it to be difficult to find financially viable solutions to the predicament that the Great Depression created for them, if they had lived in Canton, Ohio during the 1930s. This activity also incorporated financial literacy learning as well as the recall and usage of prior mathematical knowledge. On both national and state-wide levels, educational administrators have placed a growing emphasis on the value of financial literacy, especially within the Social Studies curriculum.

When we reviewed the growth of consumerism during the 1920s in class, I continuously posed several questions in order to allow the students to strengthen cause-effect relationships, especially regarding the causes of the Great Depression. We, as a class, built upon responses of students in a continuance of analyzing the causes of the Depression, and how those causes continued during the 1930s.

One of the most important qualities of a skilled teacher is adaptability. Teachers must be both willing and able to amend, alter, or completely do away with either their materials or their instructional techniques. These adaptations may develop over the course of months, weeks, days, or perhaps even from one class to the other. If one class performs poorly on an activity or in-class assessment, the teacher not only has the opportunity but also the obligation to change his or her instruction in order to better the educational experience and/or performance of the classes which follow.

A long-term aspect of my teaching that I would change is my level of enthusiasm. Throughout many classes, I felt as if I appeared monotone and relaxed. Many students seemed to be only moderately interested in the instruction. To rectify this, I could have brought a higher level of energy and mobility when instructing the class and posing the question. As a result, many of the students may have been more engaged and interested in the information. I also could have directly called upon students. I could have chosen not only students who were paying attention, but also students I did not believe to be paying attention. By using this method, I may have been able to keep their attention more consistently. By calling on the students, I take a more proactive role in assuring their attention and engagement. I also could have employed more enthusiastically positive reinforcement. I believe a higher level of energy would demand, or at least do better in drawing the attention of the students. B.F. Skinner argued that positive reinforcement increases student engagement, performance, and overall well-being (McLeod, 2015). I felt, however, that I did well to adapt to numerous personalities of the students, as it took time to learn the many ways in which each student learns, behaves, and responds in the classroom. I also believe that I did well to alter classroom activities from class-to-class, either by modifying my instruction or altering instructional materials.

In a unit regarding the Great Depression, students generally performed moderately well throughout the unit. However, there were some concepts which many struggled to grasp. One issue that they had was understanding some of the causes of the Depression. Many students were able to recall information from the previous chapter, which entailed the ways in which American society experienced a gross increase in consumer culture. They remembered the new and pervasive era of credit and consumer spending. They were also able to make predictions as to what rampant consumer debt spending and nonexistent governmental regulation may cause in the future. Still, once we began this unit, it took some time for students to understand concepts such as speculation, buying on margin, stocks, and the true meaning of a stock market crash. Still, after a repetition of recalling these terms and other vocabulary, students eventually performed better than expected on the summative assessment, which came in the form of an end-of-unit exam.

These summative exams and standardized tests are most relied upon by public schools for providing the most accurate indicator of student "achievement."[2] Throughout the United States, public school districts, their administrators, teachers, and faculty work to foster numerous benefits for their students and community (Ravitch, 2010). And perhaps the most universal focus of these schools lay with this one goal: student achievement. However, "achievement" remains a loosely defined term. Although standardized testing remains the most commonly used tool for measuring student achievement, it is not the best tool for ensuring authentic student learning and growth; instead, schools should attempt to create and innovate a more student-centered approach to their instructional practices. By increasing expectations, inspiring sustained levels of motivation, and practicing effective techniques in retaining content information, teachers will be

[2] Pages 9-17 draw from prior research I performed for a 2018 university course in Psychology.

able to improve student growth and achievement through forms of student centered learning. In thousands of American public schools, state curriculum requires students to pass a number of standardized tests. But these tests as well as aptitude tests such as the ACT or SAT are not measuring student achievement in the correct form and they should not be used to measure the quality of education. These tests measure one dimensional, simple content knowledge, comparing one student to others. They do not focus on the individual. Instead, schools should be free to move from national tests and move towards focusing on the individual. Achievement should be assessed by promoting students to practice "genuinely significant cognitive skills," such as performing complicated mathematical problems, synthesizing writing responses, or discerning the credibility of historical documents (Popham, 1999).

This entire argument is perhaps hypothetical, as curriculum change must occur first at the national or at least state levels. But even if teachers and schools had the ability to do away with standardized testing as a method to accurately assess students, it still leaves a complicated problem: how to consistently create an environment in which students take a willing and active responsibility for their education. The first step that teachers can take is increasing expectations. In 1965, Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Johnson conducted an experiment in an elementary school. What would become known as "Pygmalion in the Classroom," Rosenthal and Jacobson sought to observe and evaluate whether placing higher expectations on students would increase student performance. Accounting for differences in age, gender, ability, and minority status, the researchers concluded that there indeed is a relationship between expectations and student performance (Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968). The students who were aware that higher expectations had been placed upon them by teachers performed better than the students who were aware that lower expectations had been placed upon them by teachers (Ibid.) Although this

experiment occurred over fifty years ago, it still remains a vital basis in designing educational instruction. One drawback to this study, though, may be that even though raising expectations generally improves performance in most students, it does not take into account all of the potential individual responses. Some individuals may respond negatively to the higher expectations, as they may perhaps perceive these heightened standards as too difficult ad may become frustrated or overwhelmed in trying to accomplish them. But still, this study provides a strong basis and understanding of the impact of expectations on student achievement. By simply increasing expectations, teachers can inspire student growth and performance. Raising expectations may seem a simple tool for positively affecting student learning and achievement – and it is – but there are many potential barriers to raising expectations. One barrier is simply that it is easy for expectations to be lowered not only by the attitudes of the teacher, but also by external forces outside the classroom (Bamburg, 1994). Teachers often tailor their level of expectations to the level of control required to manage a student or group of students in the classroom. If one individual possesses a perceived high level of intellectual talent or ability, then the teacher often has to exert a minimal effort in controlling this student; however, a student who possesses a perceived low level of intellectual talent or ability, then that teacher often exerts more effort in controlling the situation, and thus lowers his or her expectations that the student is capable for high achievement (Ibid.). But the internal attitude of teachers is not the only factor that shapes expectations, as there are also numerous external forces which do so as well. A lack of resources, a lack of parent involvement and support, and even a lack of clear administrative and instructional goals contribute to lower expectations for students in public schools (Ibid).

Another dynamic of implementing high expectations is diversity. As the population of minorities in the United States continues to outpace the population of white Americans, levels of

diversity will continue to trend upwards throughout the country – especially in urban areas. With a growing level of national diversity, problems arise in schools when dealing with the consistency of expectations in diverse classrooms. A set of studies in 2006 sought to examine the relationship between the ethnicity of a student and teacher expectations. These studies concluded that teacher expectations proved to be significantly higher for European-American and Asian-American students than African-American and Latino students (McKown and Weinstein, 2008).

So, implementing high expectations, especially ones that are consistent across all types of learners, is not an easy task for teachers and schools. Teacher attitudes, forces outside of school, and high levels of diversity in classrooms prove to be substantial in limiting consistent expectations for students. However, teachers are able to work to improve their use implementation of expectations. Whether it be student talent, ability, or diversity, teachers must continuously attempt to rid, or at least minimize, their biases in treatment towards students. To account for the barriers outside of schools, administrations and teachers could innovate outreach efforts to take concepts as well as their care and support systems outside of the classroom.

Raising expectations can be a difficult but worthwhile task for improving student achievement; however, there is another element which teachers must consider while implementing higher expectations. Teachers must also attempt to motivate the students so that they reach those higher established expectations. Motivation essentially exists in two forms: extrinsically and intrinsically. An individual with extrinsic motivation acts in order to attain a reward or avoid a punishment, while an individual with intrinsic motivation acts simply for reasons of self-accomplishment or self-enjoyment.

One of the most common forms of inspiring extrinsic motivation in students is through operant conditioning. A case study in which positive reinforcement was used on a student to increase positive behavior in the classroom found that the reinforcement proved to be successful in improving the behavior. When the student behaved in the positively desired manner, he was rewarded by some form of attention or praise by the teacher; however, soon after the reinforcement was withdrawn by the teacher, the behavior devolved towards extinction, returning to the level the student had possessed before the reinforcement was applied (Walker and Buckley, 1968). So, as portrayed in this case, operant conditioning by use of positive reinforcers has the potential to increase positive behavior in the classroom. However, it is vital that the teacher be consistent in his or her reinforcement by using some steady form of ratio or interval reward pattern. Considering that motivation often operates in tandem with behavior, once a reinforcer is removed by a teacher or instructor, then the extrinsic motivation of the student or students may decrease. But even though it has its drawbacks, operant conditioning is often capable of helping inspire extrinsic motivation, as students will improve their behavior and motivation in order to receive a reward.

Many may argue that teachers should focus on inspiring intrinsic motivation by which students become motivated in their learning and education for the simple sake of learning. By aiming to inspire intrinsic motivation, teachers would not have to worry about implementing reinforcement of punishment, as students would themselves take control of their own motivation for learning. While these people would not be wrong to suggest that intrinsic motivation certainly has its benefits, it is important to be aware of a potential hazard to a teacher attempting to inspire only intrinsic motivation. Teachers may look to inspire intrinsic motivation by encouraging or praising a student for his or her own pursuits in his or her education, but through

this, students may actually become discouraged; discouragement which may arise from the effort of a teacher to instead encourage behavior and inspire motivation is known as over-justification (Covington, 2000). This over-justification occurs because students actually become "suspicious" of being encouraged or rewarded by someone else for an action that they themselves were already motivated to do in the beginning (Ibid). Still, though, this is a weak assumption, as the benefits of inspired intrinsic motivation far outweigh this over-justification theory. If a student can begin to realize the value of his or her own learning for the sake of learning and self-accomplishment, then any risk of over-justification should be taken as a necessary hazard in motivating students to learn. Although some warn of the obstacles in attempting to inspire both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation in students, the benefits of attempting to inspire motivation in a classroom far outweigh the negatives. Higher expectations hold students to a higher standard, but it is motivation which pushes the students to reach those higher expectations. The teacher is the most vital and capable figure in increasing expectations and inspiring both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation.

Raising expectations and inspiring motivation are certainly two key elements in improving the holistic qualities of a student. Still, though, expectations and motivation do not guarantee student achievement in terms of retaining content information. Once higher expectations and proper motivation are established, the instructional practices ensure that the students not only perform well in assessments, but also retain the information that they learned.

Teachers want students to not only perform well on assessments, but they also want them to retain the information which they have learned. Teachers may use a variety of forms of instruction to relay the information to students; students then absorb this information via

encoding, followed by storage. However, retrieval is the most integral process in developing long-term memory.

Due to the pervasive adoption of standardized testing as the primary form of assessing student achievement, teachers often perform what is known as 'teaching to the test.' This refers to the practice by which teachers steadily but often quickly move through content material, instructing solely with the purpose of guiding the students to pass some end-of-chapter or unit test. Teachers present the material so that students will be prepared for the test, the students take the test, and then the teacher and class move on to the next chapter or unit. Seldom are teachers afforded the time or freedom to continuously go back to previous material and review so that students are able to retain the information. This is troubling, since students are forced by the current testing-based assessment system to rapidly learn information for the tests, only to quickly forget a substantial amount of material while in the pursuit to learn new material to pass the next test. Rather than quickly moving through material in order to keep up with testing schedules, teachers must be afforded the freedom to practice proper retrieval practices with students. In one research finding, repetitive studying yielded minimal-to-no benefit, while repeated retrieval practice produced a more successful long-term retention (Karpicke & Blunt, 2011). Repetitive retrieval exercises are most useful in storing content information to the long-term memory of students.

As previously discussed, raising expectations, inspiring intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and practicing effective methods in retrieval are all effective instructional methods in positively impacting student performance. However, these beneficial techniques are suffocated by the current standardized testing system. An overwhelming majority of educational and developmental psychologists argue that standardized testing is not beneficial for youth. Still,

American children as young as the age of six are often subjected to standardized testing (Kohn, 2000). If so many psychologists are against the subjection of young students to standardized testing, one may wonder why they are so universally used throughout the United States as the 'best' methods in assessing student achievement. Standardized testing has become so ingrained in the American educational system for two primary reasons: corporations and politicians.

The corporations who develop these tests sell them are simply providing fast and easy methods of assessment for schools; schools purchase the tests, administer them in classrooms, send them to either the corporations themselves or some other entity for grading, and then the tests are quickly returned with clear results (Ibid). Aside from corporations being responsible for the standardized testing culture in America, politicians are perhaps even more responsible. Standardized tests provide politicians with easy results as well. Politicians from all points of the ideological spectrum continuously campaign on promises to increase educational performance in schools, and what better way to back up these promises by simply collecting results and manipulating the data in the attempt to feign progress (Ibid). Thus, politicians tout the easily attained test scores of their state or their region or city, not because they are so concerned for the betterment of education, but instead so that they can be re-elected and maintain power. It is a system which borders along the lines of corruption, and schools across the nation should look for new, more student-centered methods in assessing student achievement.

Moving away from testing, teachers can have the freedom to create instruction based not in the state or national requirements that are pushed by corporations and politicians, but instead based in the personal interests of students. Rather than measuring simple test scores that only measure a miniscule aspect of learning, one that does not account for the many dimensions of an individual, teachers should fight for the freedom to choose other forms of assessment such as

creativity, effort, civic engagement, collaboration, and innovation. Based on the constructivist theory of learning, student centered instruction creates the opportunity for content material to be made meaningful by fusing new material with the prior experience of students (Bender, 2016). This student centered instruction and learning encourages students to look into past experiences and attempt to understand what it was that made their prior educational experience good or bad, and what can be done to either reintroduce the good or avoid the bad. Lecture should not just simply be dictated by the teacher; instead, students should have the opportunities to discuss, work together, critically think about problems, and develop solutions. This student centered approach provides new and more authentic avenues for teachers in assessing student performance. Without having to simply measure achievement through test scores, teachers will be able to assess through a more holistic approach, one that measures the achievement of an individual from a variety of aspects and dimensions, not only one.

Implementing higher expectations, inspiring motivation, and crafting better memory retrieval practices, student achievement, and perhaps more importantly student growth, can occur. But implementing these practices is not enough in improving the American education system, as standardized testing must be relied upon less heavily in public schools. Moving away from the current culture of standardized testing in the United States is the first step in creating a more beneficial form of teaching and assessment in public schools. With a more student-centered curriculum and set of instruction, students will be free to demonstrate their achievement in a variety of authentic ways.

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